

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

John 10: 1-10
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
May 11, 2014

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Kids, somebody's grandpa, named **Ambros Johnson**, just died on Friday. When I visited with Ambros some months ago, he showed me this. It is his collection of **Sunday school attendance awards**. When he was your age, his family brought him to worship and to Sunday school all the time. As a matter of fact, Ambros received perfect attendance awards for pretty much every year that he was the right age to go to Sunday school. Each of these little pins represents a year that he never missed a single Sunday. Ambros was **very proud** of his **good attendance** at Sunday school.

But Ambros was **way more proud** of his **good God**. During my visits to Ambros' house he told me **many stories of how God was there to love and care for him over all the years of his life**. He talked about how God had blessed him with a **wonderful family**. Ambros talked about how much he loved God's **beautiful world**. He remembered **tough times** that he had experienced where God had helped him to get through. He celebrated how good it was to be **loved by God**, by his **family** and by the **people of his church family**. Ambros knew that his **good life was a wonderful gift from God**, and **Ambros was thankful**.

Ambros knew that when he died, he would be **leaving his family behind**, and that made him very sad. But he also knew that he would be **going home to heaven** to live with God, and that made him very happy. Kids, when you trust that God loves and cares for you always and forever, you, with God's help, can **handle any troubles** and **will know the happiness/joy that only God can give**.

Kids, I am so glad that **Ambros made it to Sunday school** all those years. I am so glad that Ambros **knew how much God loves him**. And kids, I am so glad that **your family brought you here today**. **So is God**. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

We broadcast our services on the radio. Last Sunday the **Holm family** was home entertaining out-of-town company. They are usually in worship every week, but last week they stayed home with their guests. When it came time for our service to come on the radio, **Alyssa, Jeremy** and some of the relatives sat down to listen. **Alyssa** was baptized as a child of God today, along with her and Jeremy's two children **Savannah and Weston**. Part way through the service, Alyssa, Mom, went downstairs to see what third grader **Savannah** and her two cousins were up to. Alyssa was surprised and happy to see Savannah and her cousins holding hands as they listened to our service on the radio. We were praying the Lord's Prayer and they were praying right along with us. Even after only a few months here at First Lutheran, Savannah has come to feel a part of the faith family that she today joined. And when she joined hands with her cousins for that prayer over the radio, she was also joining hands with all of those who joined hands here in the sanctuary that day. And she was joining hands with the whole Christian Church all over the world. And she was joining hands with every Child of God who ever lived. **And God had a hold of all of those hands too.**

We lost **Ambros Johnson** on Friday morning. God was holding Ambros' hand too. We all were. Ambros had been battling lung cancer for some months now and finally his lungs couldn't handle any more and he slipped away. Gathered around his bedside, just before he died, family members began to say their "**I love you and goodbyes for now.**" Then Ambros' twelve year old grandson, **Joe**, slipped up, and with his finger, made the sign of the cross on his grandfather's forehead. It is a blessing that Joe and his parents share every night before bed. When Joe stays with Ambros and Sunny, they receive the blessing too. That **last blessing from twelve year old Joe** went like this, "**Grandpa, child of God, may you rest in Jesus' loving arms.**" Ambros was adopted into God's family with that sign of the cross on his forehead. Ambros received the promise that God would never let him go, or give up on him. So, as Ambros moved close to leaving this world, we gathered around his bed and held his hands, and his heart and his mind and his soul. God held Ambros too. **And when Ambros slipped away from our hands,** God held

him still and carried him home to the place where there is **no more cancer or dying**, no more **loss or heartbreak**, but only **joy and celebration forever**.

When **Ambros** was baptized, **God took him by the hand and promised never to let him go**. When **Alyssa, Savannah and Weston** were baptized, God took them by the hand and promised never to let them go. When **you** were baptized, God took you by the hand and promised never to let you go.

When I visited 97 year old **Betty Lidfors** recently, she shared her bedtime prayer with me. Betty has been praying this prayer since she was a little girl.

“Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you that you have graciously kept me this day and graciously keep me this night. And I pray that you would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong. For into your hands I commit myself, my body and soul and all things. And keep your holy angel near me so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.”

When Betty is done with her nightly prayer, she says that she is **at peace with God** and **goes to sleep**. There is no better way to go to sleep, to leave this world, or to live every day than to commit our entire being, all of our lives, into the faithful and loving care of God.

REC – Residents Encounter Christ is a program run by our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic Church. It consists of a weekend, spiritual retreat which church folks hold inside county jails twice a year. The retreat tries to **live out the love and faithfulness of God for these folks** who are in perhaps the **lowest, darkest time of their lives**. Long story short, I was asked to come and hear confessions from prisoners who, after hearing and experiencing a taste of God’s great love for them, wanted to turn their lives around. They could choose either the Catholic priest, or me, the protestant pastor. For the hour before I was to hear confessions, I sat in the back of the room and observed the inmates who had chosen to participate. There were about forty of them, all far younger than me, one quarter women. Scanning the crowd I spotted a big, muscular fellow who looked to me to be the toughest among them. Finally the time came for the private confessions. My post was in a little storage closet big enough for two

chairs placed knee to knee. The first person who came through that door was the **fellow that I had determined was the scariest.**

It turned out that he wasn't so scary. He had a **big, empty hole in his heart.** It was the place God designed for God and for family to fill. As far as this guy could tell, neither God nor family had been there for quite a while. He wanted them back. I assured him that God never left and that God would help him to get his family back in there too. His hope was that God still loved and cared for him, that God would help him to start fresh in his life. I told him that God would do just that.

Some of the folks I heard confessions from shared about painfully tough upbringings. Some shared about mistakes that they had made as they tried to make a life for themselves. Many had bad starts. Many made bad choices. They had been listening to lots of voices as they made their way through life. Life has lots of voices that call out to us – drugs, booze, sex, violence, low self-esteem, depression, anger, selfishness, hatred, emptiness... Everybody has that hole in their lives, the hole that only love can fill. And everybody does everything that they can to fill it. But too often, we listen to the wrong voices and end up emptier than ever. The prisoners have heard from lots of people and things that have disappointed them. **But they probably haven't heard from Jesus for a while...**

In our Gospel, Jesus says that there are **thieves, bandits and strangers** in the world who tempt us with lies that only lead to our disappointment and death. There are all sorts of lies about what it takes to have a good life. There are all kinds of promises that say money, popularity, power, beauty, drugs, booze, tobacco, cheap sex, etc. will make us happy, will give us life. Buy that car, smoke that pot, hang with the cool crowd, let that guy have his way with you, steal some stuff, treat people like dirt, ... Happiness? Lies!

Jesus says that he **knows his sheep by name.** Jesus says that his **sheep know his voice** when he calls them. In the Gospel of John, that "**know**" word means to be in intimate relationship with. God made us to be in an intimate relationship with

Jesus. In this text, Jesus doesn't say anything about us cleaning up our acts, or about us getting our sins forgiven. Jesus says that he has come that we "**may have life and have it abundantly.**" Jesus isn't just talking about giving us **life**. Though life is God's gift to us. Jesus wants to give us **abundant life**. He's not talking about **survival**, but **flourishing**. He's not talking about just **getting by**, but **thriving**. Not just **existence**, but **joy**. Jesus is talking about sharing more life with us than we can even imagine. Jesus doesn't just **save us FROM something**. Jesus **saves us FOR something**. Jesus wants to give you **abundant life** – abundance, deep, overflowing, rich and joyous...

Do you see? A part of the world's lie is that Jesus and salvation are all about us trying to be good enough to go to heaven when we die. And when you're young, heaven seems like a long ways away. Jesus says he is **here right now** to **give you the kind of life** that you will **never be able to find anywhere else**.

Jesus said, "**I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.**" Dear friends, don't buy the **lies of the world** that say **trusting in Jesus is not cool, not true, not real, not fun**. Don't believe the lies that say you **have to take care of yourself, make your own way** in the world, **prove your worth** in order to be accepted. Our young people may believe what our world teaches about **faith, worship and prayer** – that these are **just for old people before they die**.

Jesus said, "**I came that (you) may have life and have it abundantly.**"

A little girl held hands with us as she listened to worship on the radio. A little boy marked the sign of the cross on his dying grandfather's head. Ambros Johnson was able to assure his family repeatedly that he **wasn't afraid to die**, and he could say that because he knew so well **how good it was to live** in the **loving care of Jesus for his whole life**. Dear friends, Christianity **isn't about being good**. It is **about how good and faithful our God is**. It is about **celebrating God's life-giving presence** in every moment of every day of our lives.

Do you want to **take care of yourself** and go your own way in the world? Lots of people think that's the only way to live. Or are you willing to **trust God** to walk with you, love and care for you? **God's ready**. God's already there for you, waiting. Your walk with God is already underway, or you wouldn't be here... When you walk with Jesus, **God's love, peace and blessings** are yours, come hell or high water, now and forever. You can count upon God's love, peace and blessing to be with you wherever you go. As a matter of fact, Jesus will be there for you whether you like it or not. **God's promise**.

The world has lots to say about what you will have to do in order to make a life for yourself. You've heard the many voices promising happiness that is always just out of reach.

On the other hand, God says – "**abundant life**." **Yours, now and forever**. **Free gift**. **Paid for by Jesus**. **Here this is for you**. **I want you to have it**.

Which voice are **you** going to listen to, the **world or Jesus**? Thanks be to God.
Amen.